



HOUSTON FIRE DEPARTMENT

NEWS RELEASE

PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NEW WARNING SYSTEM ALERTS CITIZENS

“The City of Houston has requested a shelter-in-place...” This was a message that some city of Houston residents heard when they received a recent phone call alerting them to stay indoors. The City of Houston recently utilized a new warning system called the Neighborhood Early Warning System or NEWS to alert citizens of a warehouse fire during the evening of Sunday, April 17.

During a press conference, April 27, 2005 at 2:30 p.m. in front of HFD Logistics Building, 1205 Dart, Fire Chief Phil Boriskie and Greater Harris County 9-1-1 Emergency Network Public Information Director Sonya Lopez Clauson will explain how this new system works and benefits the citizens of Houston and surrounding areas.

The recorded message was a warning made by HFD officials following a three-alarm fire at the Superior Packaging and Distribution plant which contained a variety of dangerous chemicals. A shelter in place warning was given to nearby residents at approximately 10:43 p.m. on Sunday evening.

NEWS is a new telephone warning system that the City of Houston can utilize to warn their citizens about dangerous situations. It is a targeted notification system that allows a specific area to be called for rapid calling and delivery of messages – such as a shelter in place notice. The system is offered by the Greater Harris County 9-1-1 Emergency Network (GHC 9-1-1) to all jurisdictions within Harris and Fort Bend Counties.

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New Alerting System, page 2

NEWS is a very effective tool for notifying area-specific residents of an emergency situation, because it utilizes the 9-1-1 database, which is the most accurate database available; it is updated several times per day and includes both published and non-published telephone numbers. Another added benefit to the system is its rapid calling feature: the system is capable of making 1,152 simultaneous calls.

“ In a crisis situation, it is imperative that all citizens within the affected area are notified of the situation and given instructions,” said Fire Chief Phil Boriskie. “The telephone is a high-speed and accurate method of delivering that emergency message.”

Once a city determines there is an emergency situation in a particular area and they need to notify citizens about it, then authorized personnel within each city or county will request an activation of NEWS. Once an activation of NEWS is made, phone calls are placed and a recorded message is delivered to all answered phone calls. The system will also attempt to call back all phone numbers that were unanswered.

The city of Houston is working with GHC 9-1-1 to educate the community more about this beneficial system. The message will leave a caller ID message of PRIORITY ALERT for phones that display this feature. Examples of activations for NEWS are: toxic fumes, lost child, criminal activity, shelter in place or evacuation instructions.

This was the first time that the City of Houston has activated NEWS to warn citizens of an emergency of this type; however it has been utilized nearly 25 times by other cities throughout the area including Deer Park, Seabrook, and Rosenberg since the system was first implemented in the Spring of 2002.